

THE DIVINE ACTOR

Personal reminiscences

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Guru Kunju Kurup, the venerable veteran of the Kathakali stage, was an actor of rare calibre whose presentation of *abhinaya* (the quintessence of Indian histrionics) has never been surpassed in living memory. With his demise, the last link with a generation that lived at the most critical period in the history of Kathakali is gone—the most precious link, one should say. This loss is sure to make any Kathakali lover ponder with sad and nostalgic memories of a great actor of whom it had often been said “when this man is on the stage, acting becomes divine”.

The first time I saw Guru Kunju Kurup was in the early thirties when the Kerala Kalamandalam was just taking shape under the tutelage of Mahakavi Vallathol. The first public performance by the Kalamandalam Kathakali Troupe was in Calicut, my home town. I had just been introduced to this great art full of variety and mystery. Its technical intricacies were then very much beyond me. All the same, I can still remember how I was kept enthralled by Kunju Kurup who was then playing the role of Bhima in *Kalyanasougandhika*. Since then I had the good fortune of witnessing most of the major roles played by the great Master; and although they were all uniformly good, there are some which stand out in my memory by their excellence.

The first in the panorama is the role of Rugmangada, the King who is bound by his promise to kill his own beloved son, a tragic role evoking the ultimate in pathos. Many a time have I seen this role being enacted by actors. But no one Rugmangada was exactly like the other; although the pathos that was created was of the same level. From an actor of Kurup's calibre, this comes as no surprise. However, a technical explanation from the artist himself will be of educative interest to art lovers. Some

of us, his admirers—used to crowd around him and ask him questions about the various *rasa-abhinaya* techniques. We asked him why Rugmangada, if he was such an ideal King, fell for Mohini, who came from nowhere in the middle of a forest. Then he explained certain rudiments of *Natya*; as to how the background for “desire” has to be a starting point, how the desire gives rise to disappointment and how that ultimately gets transformed into either pathos—as in the case of *satvic* personalities—or *raudra*, anger, as in the case of *rajasic* or *tamasic* personalities. Then he asked us to watch his Rugmangada which was being enacted that day in one of the major performances of Kalamandalam. At the first sight of Mohini, Kurup’s Rugmangada started registering his feeling of attraction for the beautiful damsel. The first deviation came when he started with “this must be a divine creation; otherwise normally personalities like mine don’t get so easily attracted.” Then cogitating on it, he enacted the *sloka* in Kalidasa’s *Shakuntalam*, wherein Dushyanta states that “in matters of doubt the promptings of a *satvic* mind register correctly and can be assumed to be the correct course.” To see the poetic genius of Kalidasa thus being transferred to the world of histrionics was a rare experience. Guru Kunju Kurup was mainly responsible for popularising the Kathakali version of *Rungmangadacharita* in middle and north Kerala where till then it was rarely enacted.

Another masterpiece of this veteran actor was his delineation of the role of Keechaka. The scene where Keechaka, basely motivated by sheer lust, tries to seduce Droupadi (Sairandhri) can easily deteriorate into vulgarity. How to act sensuousness without vulgarity is a point which has yet to be studied by many of the present-day actors including some of the most successful amongst them. The dignified manner in which Kurup did it will ever remain fresh in my memory. His suggestive glances and subtle moments were much more powerful than all the confusion that is usually created on the scene by present-day actors—no kicks, no need of making ‘Sairandhri’ act like a frightened but half permissive female and nothing that makes a connoisseur feel repulsed. The ability to differentiate between Ravana’s desire for Rambha and Keechaka’s lust for Sairandhri is a sort of touchstone to test the Kathakali actor. Kunju Kurup could with ease bring out the distinction between the arrogant, haughty, love of Ravana and the contemptuous lust of Keechaka, the debauch.

Yet another of Kurup’s roles which stands out in my memory is that of Sri Rama in *Uthararamacheritha*, in a scene (descriptive) where Sri Rama takes Sita around the Palace gardens. Sita is with child and her Lord wants to make her happy. The particular occasion was an evening of Kathakali in the Kalamandalam when some dignitaries and some distinguished foreigners were present. Poet Vallathol who wished that his Kathakali should be appreciated by the distinguished audience had given written instructions as to what each actor should portray. The script

that was given to Kurup was somehow lost. When the actual performance started Kurup began to improvise and to describe the beautiful garden. He as Sri Rama addressed Sita thus: "Do you know why this cool and scented breeze is wafting by? It is already practising how to fondle the curls on the sweet face of the baby Prince who is going to be born to you! The flowers are vying with each other to be similar in sweetness with the charming face of the Prince to be born. The few jasmine flowers (they are few because summer is past and spring has just arrived) are trying to enact the smile of the baby Prince with two or three freshly cut teeth!" Thus Kurup went on. Every item described was connected with the child that was going to be born to the Queen. In the end Sri Rama said, "You know, darkness is descending on the sweet and pleasant garden. Let us retire. Darkness of the future should not frighten our darling who is within you." Was it not a portent of the future? a foreboding of things to come? I remember how excited the poet was and how he cheered loudly and said, "Poets like us should consider ourselves fortunate that Kurup has not started writing poetry."

These three particular roles have been specially mentioned by me because Natyacharya Kunju Kurup is too well known for his portrayal of Sudama, the devout boyhood companion of Lord Krishna, Sundara Brahmana the highly cultured, elderly and affectionate well-wisher who is smooth suave and wordly wise or the famous roles of Nala and Bahuka. The present day Nalas and Bahukas are indeed modelled upon the roles portrayed by Kunchu Kurup about fifty years ago. As Sudama, Kurup's emphasis was more on his absolute dedication to prayer and surrender to the Lord than on his poverty. Without the assistance of the usual elaborateness of Kathakali make-up and costume and without any vigorous foot-movements he could capture the rapt attention of his audience by virtue of his superb histrionics. The main characteristic of Kurup's acting was his dignity and superb control of himself. He was never blatant or cheap. He would never sacrifice the traditional norms of Kathakali aesthetics in order to win popularity. This has made him a truly revered *acharya*.

While appraising and appreciating the histrionic mastery of Guru Kunchu Kurup we should not forget to recall the active roll he played in reviving the art of Kathakali. If Kalamandalam has proved successful and if the dreams of Mahakavi Vallathol have been at least partially fulfilled, I can with confidence say that the utmost cooperation rendered by Kunchu Kurup has made these possible. Cooperation. Yes, because he wanted an institution that would create aesthetic appreciation in the Kerala people. Close contact between the actor and the audience especially the younger generation was a prerequisite for such appreciation. It was here that Kurup stood out from other veterans. He always took delight in holding discussions regarding the various aspects of Kathakali

with the then growing generation. It is out of such meetings that a love and reverence for the art is generated. I have been fortunate to have some such enjoyable moments and reminiscences of these make me both humble and grateful to the *acharya* that he himself made me and others like me true devotees of Kathakali.

Kunchu Kurup's genius for the noble art of *Natya* may seem unaccountable to many of us. But he himself had a simple explanation for it. He reminded us of an incident which took place some fifty years ago. I am giving below the incident as recorded by an eminent critic to whom Kunchu Kurup had narrated the incident:

"It happened one evening at the Azvancheri Mana—a famous Namboodiri household—where the play fixed for the evening was the one about King Nala and his brother Pushkara. They were enacting the episode of Pushkara defeating his brother and banishing him from the kingdom.

"Kurup as King Nala had finished the early sequences and retired to a lonely spot near the green room. Pushkara was on the stage, Mappat Kanda Kurup doing the role. He excelled himself as Pushkara and the impressionable audience started muttering 'Pushkara holds the stage. Nala need not return now'.

"Among the audience was a Brahmin—Edamana Namboodiri—an ardent fan of Kunchu Kurup. He could not bear to see the turn of events, so unfavourable to his favourite. He went round to the green room and spotted his hero standing alone, unaware of all that was happening on the stage. Even when the Namboodiri acquainted him with the doings of Pushkara, his hero stood helpless. Suddenly the Brahmin said in a determined tone: "Don't you worry Kunchu. I will fix it all right"; and went away to return a few minutes later completely drenched after a dip in a nearby tank. He had sacred ash (*vibhuti*) in his hand. He stood proud and erect, facing Kurup, prayed from the bottom of his heart and sprinkled the sacred ash on Kurup's head. Kurup could only see that the Namboodiri was trembling. Kurup felt a new throb of life pulsating through his veins. He forgot his surroundings. He forgot himself. Like one possessed he made a dash for the stage and stole the thunder from his rival. Ever since, confessed Kurup, the same divine thrill ran through him whenever he donned his costume and entered the stage to the accompaniment of the inciting drum-beats and the irresistible music".

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